

NARRATIVE JOURNALISM SEARCHES FOR ITS PLACE AMONG AN AUDIENCE EAGER TO RECEIVE QUALITY NEWS AND CREATIVE TEXTS.

A report on *slow journalism*¹

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Changes in the journalism of the 21st Century

Journalism is constantly evolving, parallel to the transformation of the societies it inhabits. However, there are some things which do not change, since they shape their own characteristics. It continues to be an industry in which the attitudes of its professionals are marked by unrest, observation, passion and curiosity. The public exposure implicit in the practice of journalism carries an obligation to transparency which involves a responsibility to society. People have a right to information whilst society, with its legal mechanisms, must guarantee total freedom for the exercise of informing, albeit based on journalistic ethics and professional codes of practice. It is necessary to find out, contrast and inform with rigour and truthfulness in order to respond to the right to information of which society is the custodian.

The journalism of the 21st Century has gone through a serious transformation consistent with the digital ecosystem and so needs to reinvent itself and look for new formulas such as specialisation, innovation and content quality. In this digital era it is necessary to do something different in order to compete in a global environment and market where there is a proliferation of publicly accessible communication platforms. The consolidation of digital journalism has brought about noticeable changes both in the way news is broadcast and in its reception, and there are numerous research studies which point to a loss in quality.

In the new digital environment, the audience has been moving away from the conventional Media and towards social media to receive the news

The evolution of journalism over the next few years calls for concepts derived from personalisation, updating, adaptation to readership segmentation, harnessing of the potential of mobile technologies and the search for new formats. We are developing a *silent*

revolution in which digital journalism has encouraged the transformation of content, although it is also true that the traditional Media is losing credibility. Some professionals describe current journalism as ‘vacuum cleaner journalism’ that seeks easy clicks, has a desire to reach its audience massively and immediately and continuously appeals to emotional responses in the search for the greatest impact. But neither all news professionals nor all the Media act in the same way. Those who practice honest, ethical journalism want good journalism in which quality and transparency are intrinsically related. Journalists and Media outlets must work together to recover people’s trust. Nemesio Rodríguez, president of the FAPE (Spanish Federation of Journalist Associations) said, “*people must recover their trust in the Media outlets that promote quality journalism because a society dominated by lies is a society subject to manipulation and division, a breeding ground for intolerance and the absence of dialogue*” (Conference held at the UPV/EHU, 26/03/2019).

In the new digital environment, the audience has been moving away from the conventional Media and towards social media to receive the news. It is estimated that about 80% of the news comes from social media, with young people getting their information from Twitter and Instagram. According to the Digital News Report 2019 from Oxford University in collaboration with the University of Navarra, 43% of Spanish internet users trust the news, against 31% that don’t. From a list of 38 countries, Spain is still half way down the world credibility table. On the other hand, despite being increasingly used as news sources, it is a minority that trusts the news distributed via social media (25%) or search engines (34%). Journalism ethics and the people’s right to information should always go hand in hand, and journalism’s primary ethical commitment is to respect the truth. In line with this duty, the journalist will always defend the principle of freedom to investigate and disseminate information, and freedom to comment and criticise.

In the HGH research group, a permanent group in the University of the Basque Country (Universidad del País Vasco/EuskalHerrikoUnibertsitatea), we feel it necessary to develop quality journalism in Europe within the communicative ecosystem. We have taken part in different projects along this line of research and are currently working on a project financed by the Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades (CSO2016-76020-R) [Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities] with

FEDER funds from the European Union, that will finish in October 2020.

International study on narrative or *Slow Journalism*

Our research falls within a framework of international study into the health of digital narrative journalism in Spanish, within the context of in-depth or *slow journalism*. In the last decades, professional journalism has undergone fundamental changes as a consequence of the rise in digital journalism. It could be said that journalism is in a perpetual phase of transition and reinvention in which the social and productive functions that it should maintain in the current digital era are continually being questioned. It is precisely within this technological cycle that the credibility and quality of journalistic news has diminished.

Highly topical journalism is confined to presenting events or occurrences and looking for a circumstantial opportunity. Slow or narrative journalism, in contrast, searches out the facts, the background and circumstances in many other ways, even months after the news has broken. The Argentine journalist and writer Leila Guerriero, says that “*it is basically the conviction that stories should be narrated, that it isn’t the same to tell the story in just any old way*”.

It is a journalism that goes beyond the narrative, beyond the mere presentation of data and furnishes the information with the context necessary for people to form their own opinion. It is a journalism that flees from the ephemeral and demands a slow, paused reading. It presents an invitation to rethink the *tempos* needed to produce and consume rigorous, creative, quality news. The use of new technologies hugely amplifies the echo of these journalistic practices. Moreover, people are increasingly choosing to consume information online.

Our research is based on an international study using a triangulation and mixed method with exploratory, descriptive and quantitative techniques: consultation of documentary sources, case studies, in-depth interviews, Delphi study (two rounds) and surveys (500 surveys per country -Argentina, Colombia, Spain and Mexico - a total of 2,000 surveys). These techniques were applied to 10 representative digital Media entities within the *slow journalism* context in five Ibero-American countries: *Revista Anfibia* (Argentina) *La silla vacía* (Colombia) *Revista Arcadia* (Colombia) *Jot Down* (Spain), *Revista 5W* (Spain) *CTXT* (Spain) *Yorokobu* (Spain) *Panenka* (Spain) *Letras Libres* (Mexico) *Gatopardo* (Mexico).

¹ This report is the result of research carried out by the Research Group “Hedabideak, Gizartea eta Hezkuntza / Mass-media, Society and Communication” (HGH) from the University of the Basque Country / Euskal HerrikoUnibertsitatea (UPV/EHU). The research team is made of: Carmen Peñafiel (Investigadora Principal), Alazne Aiestaran, Beatriz Zabalondo, ImanolMurua, Txema Ramirez de la Piscina, Guillermo Gurrutxaga,

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Table 1. Narrative journalism websites in Spanish

Revista	Web	País	Ámbito temático	Fundación	Director/a
JOT DOWN	jotdown.es	España	Cultura	2011	María Jesús Marhuenda
LETRAS LIBRES	letraslibres.com	México	Cultura	1999	Enrique Krauze
5W	revista5w.com	España	Política internacional	2015	Agus Morales
GATOPARDO	gatopardo.com	México	Cultura	2000	Felipe Restrepo
ctxt	ctxt.es	España	Generalista	2015	Miguel Mora
Anfibia	revistaanfibia.com	Argentina	Generalista	2012	Cristian Alarcón
LASILAVACIA	lasillavacia.com	Colombia	Política	2009	Juanita León
ARCADIA	revistaarcadia.com	Colombia	Cultura	2005	Camilo Jiménez
YOROKOBU	yorokobu.es	España	Cultura	2009	Juanjo Moreno
Panénka	panenka.org	España	Fútbol	2011	Aitor Lagunas

Source: Own creation

Our starting hypothesis is: quality *slow journalism* is increasing daily on the Internet. What today is quantitatively secondary and geographically peripheral could become qualitatively significant in the near future. In some cases, it could challenge the predominance of what, up to now, have been reference Media entities. Slow journalism could be the prelude to ensuing disruptions that render obsolete something which, up to very recently, had seemed eternal.

The acceleration in the production rhythms of the news, together with the need to be connected to social media 24 hours a day generates anxiety among ever increasing sectors of the population.

Nowadays, the main players in slow journalism production belong to a wide array of transmitters: veteran journalists victims of the crisis; lovers of literature with a talent for narration, professionals who practice data or investigative journalism; cultural innovators with a passion for the new editorial models emerging online; reporters and analysts who are enthusiasts of long formats and have been ousted from the paper format; and bloggers without boundaries or complexes who attempt to explain the complexity of social phenomena through context.

The reinvention of journalism in the digital ecosystem

The analysed publications arise from different circumstances, but are all motivated by the search for news quality, by their innovative role in the way of telling stories and by confronting the profound crisis in journalism affecting both the Media and the work situation of many journalists. Some of the analysed Media have a print edition as well as a digital version, and each edition or medium is designed with different but complementary aims and content. They are characterised by a small workforce, but they have an extensive network of collaborators, generally specialised professionals. The most representative profiles

in these organisations are director, commercial director or editor, editor, digital editor and freelance experts in different areas.

The ten digital Media analysed stand out for: their rigorous treatment of content, a meticulous style, the importance given to interviews and reports, their commitment to precision, creativity and the use of different techniques, different resources, the application of new narratives thanks to new technologies, eye-catching innovation and design, etc.

The analysed publications arise from different circumstances, but are all motivated by the search for news quality, by their innovative role in the way of telling stories and by confronting the profound crisis in journalism

The biggest difference with these Media is their business model: some have emerged from the bosom of other major publications (*Arcadia*, *Letras Libres* and *Gatopardo*); others have appeared ex professo as a response to a gap in the market detected by the founders themselves (*Jot Down* and *Yorokobu*). They also differ in their reduced staff numbers, although they are limited work groups with a wide network of specialised collaborators. One of the main challenges of this innovative digital current is that of creating sustainable online journalistic companies and communities, given that one of the characteristics shared by this type of Media is the lack of a clear, viable business model with a sustainable consumption.



Home page of *Gatopardo* from 21st January 2020.

Taking into account the most notable characteristics of *slow journalism*, it could be defined as follows:

Narrative journalism is a long format journalism with a meticulous style that cultivates all the informative genres. It is neither subject to the 5 Ws nor to the inverted pyramid. It is aimed at a specialised audience which demands a more paused journalistic reception. Narrative journalism is related to literary journalism and immersion journalism since its rhetoric draws on the language of investigation. Narrative journalism is committed to informing with precision, to telling stories in a creative, in-depth way, with diverse techniques and different resources. It takes formal aspects from literature that go hand in hand with a fresh, free style that is proximate to the reader.



Home page of *Arcadia* from 19th October 2018.

Reading habits of the people surveyed

According to data from July 2019, of the people surveyed between the ages of 18 and 65 who have consumed digital press, 36% claim to have read the narrative press at some point, after being informed of the definition included in the survey itself and of some examples of brands. This proportion is significantly higher in Colombia.

Some 78% of this population in the analysed countries regularly use the digital press to find out about current affairs. The population uses social media in the same proportion and television to a lesser extent (73%) for the same end. Almost half of those surveyed listen to the news on the radio on a regular basis and only a quarter of the studied population consumes the print press which was not a priority medium. They highlight the digital press and social media as their primary news medium, with the former having a higher incidence in Spain (42%) and Argentina (38%) whilst the latter has a greater incidence in Mexico (primary news medium for 52%), and in Colombia (36%).



Home page of *Letras libres* from 21st January 2020.

The digital press is the primary news medium for 41% of men, whilst it is social media for 40% of women. The population between the ages of 18 and 34 get their information primarily from social media (53%, with as much as 90% in this age range doing so regularly), whilst a minority of the 50 – 65 age range use this medium as their priority. The consumption of radio and print media drops considerably among the youngest age group.

The digital press is significantly paramount for people with a post graduate university degree. Television stands out as the main news medium for 36% of those who have completed compulsory schooling, to a greater extent than the rest of the population. Social media is the main source for those who have completed professional training or further education, whilst those with post graduate university degrees consider social media a primary source of news information, although in a much lower proportion.

The reading frequency of print media is extremely diverse: nearly a quarter read it on a daily basis, whilst a fifth never read it. Print media is read more often by men and people over the age of 34. In Mexico it is consumed less than in the other countries. Digital press is consumed much more frequently than print, but as with this latter format, there are significant differences in gender and age. The digital press is also read more often by men and those over the age of 34.

Trust in the news medium is the main reason for consuming it (61%), and this is more common among those in Colombia (65%). Secondly, readers look for specific subjects (43%), something which also has a higher occurrence in this Andean country (52%) as in Mexico (50%), similarly among those under the age of 35 (48%). One fifth of news consumers choose one outlet in particular. Some 17% of

those surveyed do so because of the editorial line, which is more common among men (21%) than women (13%). Lastly, in Argentina, 16% are looking to form part of a community, to a greater extent than the rest.

Narrative journalism is mainly valued because it offers critique (61%), reflection (52%) and a capacity for analysis (52%)

There is a higher proportion of people who have had or maintain a subscription to a printed news medium (34%) than to a digital one (24%), and, in this sense, Colombia as a country stands out, as does the age range of 50 - 65.



Home page of *La Silla Vacía* from 21st January 2020.

Reader commitment to narrative journalism

Among those who have read the digital narrative press (N=718), the brands consumed differ among countries of residence. In Colombia, the most read brands are *La Silla Vacía* (66%), *Soho* (52%), *Gatopardo* (40%) and *Malpensante* (43%); in Argentina, *Orsai* (31%), *Anfibia* (25%) and *Etiqueta Negra* (25%); in Spain, *Jot Down* (44%) and *La Marea* (33%); and in Mexico, *Gatopardo* (38%), *La Silla Vacía* (31%) and *Contexto* (25%).

Half of those who read the narrative press do so at least once a week and 52% spend between 15 and 30 minutes at a time. Some 40% read it interchangeably during the week or at

weekends and a third read it at the weekend, with this last figure reaching 45% in Spain. As much as 91% use a digital support, mainly a phone with data access (80%). This appliance is used to a lesser extent in Spain (64%) and among those over the age of 50 (69%) whilst it is the main tool for younger users (90%) to read the digital narrative press. The main access platform for this type of press is social media (71%). This percentage is significantly lower in Spain (61%).

The majority of narrative press consumers are looking for news about politics (56%), culture (55%) and science and technology (50%). In Colombia (58%) and among those with a post graduate university degree (66%) consumers also seek opinion, whilst the youngest age group are more interested in society issues (50%).



Home page of *Jot Down* from 10th July 2018.

Narrative journalism is primarily valued because it offers critical opinions (61%), reflection (52%) and a capacity for analysis (52%). The preferred genres are analysis (30%) and feature (23%), whilst in Spain in addition reports are also popular (33%).

From those surveyed, 15% who consume narrative journalism are subscribed to a medium of this type. This proportion is significant among the younger age group (20%) and in big cities (19%) whilst it is lower in Spain (11%).

Narrative journalism is highly valued among its consumers (4 out of 5), whilst its quality and future probabilities are given the same score (3.9). The scores are significantly higher among women than men.

Among other results gleaned from our research, 63% of the people surveyed are not prepared to pay for the quality of narrative journalism. There is a greater willingness to pay in Colombia (49%) and Mexico (47%). Almost half (47%) believe that journalism should return to a narrative style on the Internet. Those who think that journalism shouldn't be redirected (21%) argue that both types of journalism should exist or even a variety of styles.



Home page of CTXT from 21st January 2020.

A strategic move to stand out in an age of information superabundance

What can be gleaned from the interviews carried out with different professionals from the analysed Media (journalists, editors, technological managers...) is that these digital media entities stand out for surviving in the midst of an information surge, for renewing and differentiating themselves from the rest in the middle of an economic and journalistic crisis.

One of the strategic elements is the commitment to *slow journalism*, in which the content is well thought out and planned both in the medium and long term. Thanks to specialisation from freelance collaborators subjects can be dealt with more deeply.

In some narrative Media, for example *Jot Down*, the aim is to analyse series subjects with humour. The focus is fun and attractive, and the protagonists are presented in a different way in the various subjects covered: culture, sport, politics, science, sex and international conflicts.

All the analysed Media have managed to create their own seal of identity, a corporate image that differentiates them from the rest. Their news desks include journalism and advertising professionals, but there are also those that have come into existence with professionals from neither the world of journalism nor communication (political scientists, Home page

sociologists, lawyers, economists, etc.). They are generally made up of a reduced staff of professionals but with a high number of regular collaborators (100, 400 or 1,600 as in the case of *Anfibia* among journalists, academics, photographers and illustrators).

There are some Media outlets which have chosen to go with a mixture of styles in order to cultivate thought and culture by opening up to different voices and alternative tendencies, as is the case of *Yorokobu*. The structure of this magazine is horizontal, without a hierarchy. As its director, Juanjo Moreno, says (May 2019): “*Yorokobu doesn’t live off current issues, although its content is topical. None of our content is conditioned by a publication date, or a sell-by date. We are not here to compete with other Media that live off the news*”. The creator-shareholders of *Yorokobu* firmly believe that information is an asset which should be available to everyone: “*We are in a world where there is an excess of information, but we believe information should be accessible to everybody, we don’t want to limit anyone. We don’t think there is much future in the idea of paying for information*” (Abella, 2018).

The most developed genres in the slow Media are interview and report, followed by feature, and they are far removed from highly topical journalism and the five Ws

Gatopardo was originally located within a market niche which hadn’t been practiced very much in Mexico at that time – that of a narrative journalism focused on diverse subjects of interest beyond the urgency of the journalistic agenda, but from a current issues perspective. In the words of its director, Felipe Restrepo, (July 2018) – currently ex-director of the magazine –: “*We don’t mind not publishing the news of the week, but if in six months time we think something is a good story, then we’ll publish it. We are above current affairs, although not above circumstantial*

opportunities”. *Gatopardo* attempted to bring together Latin American journalists who were rethinking the profession, telling stories and narrating the reality of their countries.



Home page of *Anfibia* from 22nd October 2020.

Some digital Media emerge beneath the umbrella of others with a long history, as is the case of *Letras libres*, a monthly magazine featuring critique and creativity, founded in 1999, successor to the magazine *Vuelta* founded by Octavio Paz. It has two editions: one in Mexico and another in Spain, with slight variations between them, although not in the main sections. We could also mention *Anfibia* which shares its news desk with the digital magazine *Cosecha roja*, both directed by Cristian Alarcón although they are independent products. There is also *Arcadia*, born in 2005 as a cultural supplement to *Semana*, a prestigious Colombian current affairs magazine from which it became independent in 2012, but with which it still shares resources even today. In contrast, the list also contains native digital Media such as *La Silla Vacía*, also Colombian, which appeared in 2009.

Panenka is the initiative of the historian and journalist Aitor Lagunas. In an attempt to lay the foundations of an unprecedented project in Spain, he invited a group of photographers, journalists, illustrators and designers to participate in the creation of a cultural football magazine. This format already existed in other European countries such as *SoFoot* in France or *11Freunde* in Germany, but not in Spain. The first issue was launched in June of 2011 in digital format with collaborations from footballers and trainers. *Panenka* deals with football culture from political, social, historical and cultural perspectives, does not exclude any genre and is far removed from the major sports dailies.

Among the general Spanish Media that follow current events from a slow philosophy, *CTXT* stands out. It was born in 2015 at the hands of renowned journalists disillusioned with the journalistic practices of the main Media, and who proclaim themselves proud to “get to the news late”. The magazine *5W*, specialised in international politics, also first came out in 2015, launched by nine prestigious news correspondents and photojournalists looking for a digital Media outlet in which to publish long distance features and in-depth narratives supported by quality photography.



of *Yorokobu* from 21st January 2020.



Home page de 5W from 1st October 2018.

All these texts follow a working line which is very different to that continually attributed to the Internet, “online texts should be brief, light and easy to digest”. Far removed from this idea, digital narrative journalism features long, in-depth texts. It often uses techniques typically found in literary narrative, but without moving into fiction (except in erotic stories). The most developed genres are interview and report, followed by feature, greatly distanced from the highly topical issues and the 5Ws. Ethics, design and content characterise the long, formal texts which are illustrated by the testimonies of relevant personalities along with those of ordinary people.

Also included in the strategy line of these Media is the idea of helping to develop critical thinking, and dealing with other aspects of life which do not appear in the general Media and are not on the news agenda. They are always looking for creativity and originality. They are Media which inspire and motivate, whilst helping to develop a critical spirit. In terms of the articulation between pieces in print and in digital format, the same work and concept philosophy applies to both: magazine articles should be even more timeless and long lasting, and should encourage reflection.

The experts’ opinion

The experts who took part in the Delphi study that forms part of this research, expressed their concern about the drop in the levels of a quality conditioned by the tendency to infotainment. However, they felt unable to generalise, given that they see a polarisation between the Media of high quality and that of low quality. In fact, they are optimistic about the possibilities of developing tools which improve the quality offered by digital journalism, such as checkers, together with the emergence of new Media which stand up to the major outlets’ conditioning of the agenda.

The Delphi study is a prospective method used to get a consensual opinion from a group of experts whilst safeguarding their anonymity. It involves experts responding to successive questionnaires in various rounds until the research team decides that any further rounds would not provide any new knowledge. The Delphi study on *slow journalism* was carried out in two rounds between May 2018 and June 2019: 28 experts completed the first round and 25 the second. In terms of the functions of narrative journalism and the place it occupies, the experts consulted in the Delphi study consider that it promotes quality, provides



El editorial del #Panenka77: Un Mediterráneo feliz

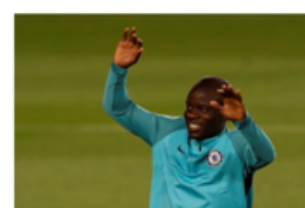
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Home page of Panenka from 23rd September 2018.

reflexivity, has the capacity to educate readers by making them become more involved in the news and allows the reader to remember and better understand information. However, they point out that, in terms of sales and readership, the market is still quite limited, being smaller than that of traditional journalism. Nonetheless, the majority agree this kind of journalism is more necessary than ever to combat misinformation and information overload.

The experts are optimistic about the future of narrative journalism in so much as they see a growing space in which it can distinguish itself from that which focuses on immediacy

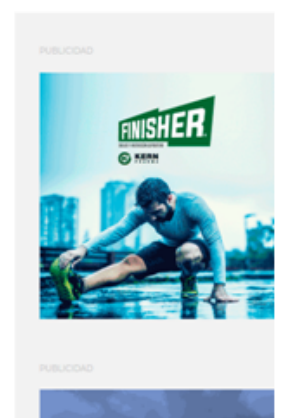
The aspects of its characteristics that they highlight are: time and distance for analysis, depth, context and informative independence, the human value of its stories, its creativity and the participation of its audience. They consider the keys to its success to be specialisation, the marking of its own editorial line, and the attention to stories sometimes overlooked by the Media but which may be of interest to certain sectors of the audience. In this sense, they mention investigative journalism as the most in-depth. In fact, they highlight the possibilities which narrative journalism offers



Arroz con curry

MARCEL BELTRAN

Obsesionarnos con la personalidad de Kanté podría inducirnos al error de perder la referencia de su juego.



for widening the range of news sources.

As far as genre goes, those who took part in the study mentioned above all in-depth report, interview and feature as the formats that

incorporate complexity and analysis. In this sense, although they recognise that audiovisual supports have great potential for accompanying the narrative, they maintain that they should not be used to replace a written text. Likewise, they point out that technology is moving more and more towards audiovisual consumption on the small screen and therefore, *slow* organisations should design the news for different supports and experiment with narration in different formats and styles.

Regarding the profile of the people who carry it out, they identify a hybrid between specialised training in some field or other and the ability to write well, together with a respect for the foundations of journalism – rigor, quality, transparency and independence. They also mention initiative and creativity. The consumer profile outlined by the experts is that of a person more interested in quality than in a rapid consumption of the news. That is, someone more cultured, with a heightened sensitivity, an active curiosity and cultural conscience, with time to read and be able to analyse the nuances and depth of the stories. Therefore the experts highlight how important it is that the Media

which opts for narrative journalism maintain feedback with its readers, thus creating a community which contributes to the viability of the medium.

Indeed, regarding sustainability, they recommend that Media outlets remain consistent when looking for sources of financing and guarantee independence, transparency and the legitimacy of journalistic work. They believe the ideal model for slow Media is the non reliance on external funding. To that effect, they consider that governments could better regulate the communication system, in such a way as to foster better conditions which allow the practice of slow journalism. On the other hand, there is no clear consensus when it comes to establishing the type of legal business model for narrative Media. Some participants advocate for workers co-operatives, limited partnerships, journalist trusts or NGOs via hybrid or mixed models that combine the need to pay the bills with the non profit principle.

The people surveyed were specifically asked about the future of print media. They believe that specialised publications will still be produced, aimed at more specific readerships and that the most representative general daily papers in each country will probably continue. Lastly, they are optimistic about the future of narrative journalism in so much as they see a growing space in which it can distinguish itself from that which focuses on immediacy.

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